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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a detailed description of the Program in Interpreting and Translating at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, Scotland. Specific sections address the following: (1) the degree emphasis; (2) formal training and professional relevance; (3) departmental provision for interpreting and translating; (4) the expertise and experience of staff; and (5) careers of graduates in Britain, Europe, and abroad. (VWL)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

# Digest

October 1992

## Translating and Interpreting Programs: A Scottish Example

(EDO-FL-92-04)

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Graduates with degrees in foreign languages from U.S. colleges and universities do not often have the skills needed to enter the professions of translation and interpretation. Although translation courses may be included in the foreign language curriculum at some universities, most translation and interpretation training in this country is offered at the graduate level through specialized certificate or degree programs.

This is not always the case in other countries. This Digest describes an undergraduate language program in Scotland that is designed to provide students with many of the skills required to pursue a career in translation or interpretation: a high level of oral and written proficiency in English and two other languages, a solid understanding of the cultures of the countries where the languages are spoken, and broad knowledge of subject areas in international affairs, economics, business, etc. This program may serve as a model for other university language programs that are interested in adding a translation and interpreting component to their curriculum.

The Program in Interpreting and Translating in the Department of Languages at Heriot-Watt University (Scotland) focuses primarily on specialist communicative skills. Students graduate with a very high level of competence and proficiency in at least two languages and in their mother tongue, which, in the majority of cases, is English. The course of study leads to a British university qualification (BA Honors) and does not, therefore, have as its principal purpose the training of interpreters and translators, as do most of the department's exchange partners abroad. The academic emphasis of the program has not, however, precluded the development of a substantial vocational thrust: The majority of graduates pursue careers in applied languages, many of which involve, wholly or in part, interpreting and translating.

### *The Degree Emphasis*

The program lasts for four years, the third of which is divided between two partner institutes in countries of which the students are learning the language. Languages taught in the department are French, German, Spanish, and Russian (some of these for the beginning level), and elective classes include Arabic and, if staff time permits, Italian and Danish. Oral and written skills are given equal status, and intensive practice in both of the languages that students have chosen to study reflects the specialist skills in the degree.

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Through a topic-based syllabus, there is constant interaction of language and content and of practice and theory. Proficiency in a variety of applied language skills is acquired along with a thorough grounding in the culture, background, and institutions of the countries of which the language is studied. There is, whenever necessary and appropriate, reference to corresponding aspects of British life and institutions. Elective subjects include principles of business law, mathematics for economic sciences, accounting, industrial relations, marketing, and economics.

The syllabus of the three years spent in the department progresses through three levels from introduction through consolidation to specialization, with regard to both content and skills acquisition. Thus, for example, in their final year, students specialize in international affairs and international economy, translation studies, and conference interpreting, the last of which is taught by a professional interpreter.

### *Formal Training and Professional Relevance*

Activities related to oral practice include aural comprehension, structured spoken classes, notetaking, glossary compiling, and conference and liaison interpreting. The types of written exercise taught and assessed are text analysis, summarizing, abstracting, essay writing, on-sight and written translating from and into a foreign language, revising, editing, and proofreading. This wide-ranging practical input involves acquisition of skills that are mutually transferable from oral to written skills. Some skills are clearly of direct relevance to the professions of interpreting and translating.

### *Departmental Provision for Interpreting and Translating*

Equipment in the department that is available to and in constant use by students is also of relevance to both professions. Classes in conference interpreting are held in specialist laboratories with fully equipped, professional-type, sound-proofed booths. The department has an extensive tape and disk library, two conventional language learning laboratories, closed circuit television, and satellite broadcasting. The last ensures the availability of up-to-the-minute materials for oral courses.

Computers are available both in the department and in the faculty, which has a suite of networked computer laborato-



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ries. When they join the department, many students have already had experience in the use of computers. This is developed in the first year when they are introduced to techniques of word processing, arguably the most useful asset for the modern translator.

There is a room in the library containing over 400 multilingual specialist dictionaries.

### *The Expertise and Experience of Staff*

Final year French and German conference interpreting is taught by a professional interpreter, a member of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), who, before joining the department, was a freelance interpreter in Brussels and Rome. Her insights and professional advice make an invaluable and constant contribution to the academic work of the department. Most lecturers have had, and continue to have, experience—in many cases, considerable experience—in interpreting and translating. Some have been granted a leave of absence requested precisely to extend, review, or simply bring up to scratch their expertise in one or both disciplines.

This expertise and experience are passed on to students through faculty teaching and information sessions provided by faculty and outside speakers who are interpreters or translators. One of these speakers is a senior translator with the European Parliament in Strasbourg and a graduate of the department. Another is a graduate who, in addition to several years of professional practice, has worked in a highly successful departmental interpreting and translating service for industry and commerce, Integrated Language Services (ILS). These sessions provide advice to students on the various aspects of interpreting and translating, including in-house careers, freelancing, expectations of employers in terms of quality and methods, conditions of work, professional associations, need for experience, use of archives and databases, consultation with terminologists, and the range of types of translation and interpreting required by employers.

The department is a corporate member of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI), the professional body for translators and interpreters in Britain, and also of the standing conference of University Colleges for Translators and Interpreters (CIUTI), the leading international professional organization for the two disciplines. At present, only three British universities have been granted membership in CIUTI.

Membership in such professional organizations and longstanding exchanges with institutes of which most are designated schools of interpreting and translating provide a unique professionally oriented dimension for the Heriot-Watt University degree. The names of some of the exchange institutes indicate their vocational purpose: Institut für Übersetzer und Dolmetscherausbildung der Universität Wien; Instituto Superior de Intérpretes y Traductores, Mexico City; Institut Supérieur de l'Etat de Traducteurs et Interprètes, Bruxelles; Ecole de Traduction et d'Interprétation, Genève; Institut Supérieur d'Interprétariat et de Traduction, Paris, to name but a few. Many of the department's German university partners award a diploma in interpreting and translating.

Through this substantial network of partner institutes, contacts with a number of organizations and companies in Britain and abroad, and through the professional contacts of departmental staff and graduates, placement and internships have been arranged for postgraduates and for students during their vacations. Many are arranged within European Community institutions. Practice such as this has proved immensely successful and rewarding for the students involved, for departmental prestige, and, above all, for clients.

### *Careers in Britain, Continental Europe, and Overseas*

If evidence of the successful professionalism of the degree in interpreting and translating were required, it must lie in the careers of graduates of the department. The vast majority go into further training, postgraduate study, or employment as a direct result of obtaining the degree, which has been of special interest to postgraduate selectors at other academic institutions and to employers. Many graduates work in international banking and insurance, many find employment in industry and commerce, others are employed in government and civil service and in the diplomatic and foreign services. Some work in journalism and broadcasting, some in the European Parliament or the Commission and NATO, and a few use their specialist communicative skills in the teaching of foreign languages. The university degree in interpreting and translating has been enriched by professional input that has developed over the years, almost imperceptibly, to become an essential, if unofficial, vocationally oriented component of the degree.

### *For Further Reading*


American Translators Association. (1987). *Profile of a competent translator and of an effective translator-training program*. Croton-on-Hudson, NY: Author.

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